

# Sin and Human Suffering: A Contextual Criticism of John 5:14 and John 9:1-3 with Reference to the Karo People

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## **Abstract**

In the course of human history, sin and human suffering have been perennial topics of discussion. It was commonly believed that human suffering was the result of sin. This article argues, using contextual criticism, that the link between sin and human suffering is not found in John 5:14 and John 9:1-3. In other words, human suffering is not always caused by sin. The exegetical findings of John 5:14 and John 9:1-3 are then placed in dialogue with the Karo understanding of the connection between sin and human suffering. The aforementioned procedure is called contextual criticism.

## **Keywords**

Fourth Gospel, contextual criticism, sin, human suffering, Karo people

## **INTRODUCTION**

From the past to the present, society has been preoccupied with sin and illness.<sup>1</sup> When discussing sickness or human suffering, people unhesitatingly attribute it to previous sins. Even the Christian tradition has maintained that suffering signifies an unusual relationship with God and that the

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1 See Christian Laes, ed., *Disability in Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 2017); Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book, 2010), 777-778; Andreas A. Yewangoe, "Membangun Teologi Bencana: Pergumulan Teodice and Teologi Penderitaan Allah," dalam *Teologi Bencana*, ed. oleh Ati H. Rambe, Markus H. Rambe, dan Jilles de Klerk (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2019), 201-202.

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suffering person is either divinely blessed or damned: the defiled evildoer or the spiritual superhero.<sup>2</sup>

This article could be considered an example of Asian biblical hermeneutics.<sup>3</sup> It endeavors to engage in a dialogical interpretation of the text within its context and an Asian context (contextual criticism). The article strongly advocates for contemporary interpreters to conscientiously consider the context in which they live. It seeks to read the text within its context and then dialogue with the social context, which ultimately contributes to social transformation. The article not only demonstrates the effectiveness of contextual criticism in elucidating the text's meaning. For instance, contextual criticism seems to have succeeded in its proposition that sin and human suffering are not interconnected in John 5 and John 9.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, the article contributes to the field of Asian biblical hermeneutics by presenting a future-referential interpretive model. A new approach to interpretation is proposed in the article, taking into account the shortcomings of, *inter alia*, narrative criticism, which fails to capture the interpreter's context. This approach may be referred to as contextual criticism.

This article examines the relationship between sin and human suffering in John 5:14 and John 9:1-3 because these passages are frequently used to illustrate the sin-suffering conflation.<sup>5</sup> It argues, using contextual criticism, that neither John 5 nor John 9 link sin and human suffering.

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2 Nancy L. Eiesland, *Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 70.

3 See Daniel K. Listijabudi, *Bergulat di Tepian: Pembacaan Lintas Tekstual Dua Kisah Mistik (Dewa Ruci dan Yakub di Yabok) untuk Membangun Perdamaian* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia dan Duta Wacana Press, 2019); Margaretha Martha Anace Apituley, *Teologi Laut: Mendialogkan Makna Laut dalam Keluaran 14-15 berdasarkan Kosmologi Masyarakat Titawaai di Pulau Nusalaut-Maluku dengan Kosmologi Israel Kuno* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2021).

4 On parallel structure of John 5 and John 9 see R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 139-140.

5 Eiesland, *Disabled God*, 71-72; also Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 52.

## SIN AND HUMAN SUFFERING

### *John 5:14*

According to the vast majority of interpreters,<sup>6</sup> John 5:14 indicates that the paralytic's disability was caused by his past sins. In other words, modern interpreters identify sin as the predominant cause of human suffering. Therefore, it is imperative to examine John 5:14. John 5:14 will be analyzed by focusing on the characters in the narrative world as the carriers of the narrative's theme.<sup>7</sup> In this line of thought, the interaction between the man with a disability and Jesus, the protagonist, is analysed. John 5:14 will therefore be examined in the light of John 5:1-47.<sup>8</sup>

The narrator carefully selects narratives that clearly illustrate why it is so difficult for people to believe in Jesus. As will be discussed further below, the narrative of Jesus and the lame man contains no clear indication that the man came to believe Jesus as a result of experiencing the works of Jesus. The story demonstrates dramatically that experiencing the works of Jesus does not necessarily compel an individual to believe in Jesus. Moreover, experiencing healing by obeying Jesus's words does not require faith in Jesus.

As depicted by the narrator, the man, most likely a Jew, had suffered from *astheneia* (ἀσθένεια) for thirty-eight years, indicating his hopelessness<sup>9</sup> and

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- 6 Keener, *John*, 1: 643; Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 182, 281; George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 2nd ed., Word Biblical Commentary 36 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 74; Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Gospel according to John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 188, 333; D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 245-246; Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St John 2: Commentary on Chapters 5-12*, Herder's Theological Commentary on the New Testament (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 97; Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1971), 243; Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John I-XII: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, Anchor Bible 29 (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 208.
- 7 Armand Barus, "John 2:12-25: A Narrative Reading," dalam *New Currents Through John: A Global Perspective*, ed. oleh Francisco Lozada Jr. dan Tom Thatcher (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 123.
- 8 See Jacobus (Kobus) Kok, *New Perspectives on Healing, Restoration and Reconciliation in John's Gospel*, Biblical Interpretation Series 149 (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 95-99; Armand Barus, "The Structure of the Fourth Gospel," *Asia Journal of Theology* 21, no. 1 (April 2007): 106.
- 9 Köstenberger, *John*, 179; Brown, *John I-XII*, 207; C.H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 320.

loneliness.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, he persists in waiting, fully aware that there is not a single person who will assist him in descending to the water. Likewise, due to his enduring paralysis, he is marginalized by society.<sup>11</sup> By fixating on his disability he isolates himself from society. Jesus asks him whether he wishes to be healed. The term “*astheneia*” could refer to either weakness or illness,<sup>12</sup> though he is described as crippled (vv. 6-9) or at least unable to walk. When the religious leaders accuse the crippled man of breaking the Sabbath law, despite having been healed by Jesus he does not even show sympathy for Jesus but, rather, blames him, just as he initially blamed others for his continued suffering.<sup>13</sup> His long suffering and despair (v. 7) move Jesus to compassion (v. 6). Thus, the healing he receives by obeying Jesus does not establish a personal relationship between him and Jesus,<sup>14</sup> much less lead him to believe in him.<sup>15</sup> We can only hypothesize that the man responded by attending or possibly worshipping at the temple.<sup>16</sup> The healed man had gone directly to the temple to offer thanks for his recovery.<sup>17</sup>

When he hesitatingly responds to Jesus’s proposition, the man’s disbelief is also evident (v. 6). In the Greco-Roman world and especially in Jewish thought, the five-time occurrence of the word *hygiēs* (vv. 6, 9, 11, 14, 15) signifies both physical and spiritual well-being.<sup>18</sup> This could be interpreted as a challenge to be physically and spiritually healed, and thus primarily as a call to think about who Jesus was or to believe in him.<sup>19</sup> When Jesus

10 See Larry Paul Jones, *The Symbol of Water in the Gospel of John*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 145 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 126-128.

11 Stephen Motyer, *Your Father the Devil?: A New Approach to John and "the Jews"* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997), 123.

12 G. Stählin, "ἄσθενής," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 490-493.

13 Cf. J.C. Thomas, "The Fourth Gospel and Rabbinic Judaism," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 82 (1991): 171-172.

14 On faith as a personal relationship with Jesus see Barus, "John 2:12-25: A Narrative Reading," 123-140.

15 Keener, *John*, 1: 644.

16 Cf. Keener, *John*, 1: 643.

17 Keener, *John*, 1: 643.

18 See U. Luck, "ὄγιής," *of the New Testament* 8 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 308-313.

19 Contra Ernst Haenchen, *John 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of John Chapters 1-6*, vol. 1, *Hermeneia* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 255; J.L. Staley, "Stumbling in the

encounters him at the temple, he reiterates his earlier proposition and tells him the repercussions of his unbelief (v. 14). His reluctance to know and to believe in Jesus hinders the crippled man from establishing a relationship with Jesus. In John's terminology, having a relationship with Jesus entails not only hearing Jesus's words and the voice of the Son of God but also believing in Jesus (v. 24-25).

It is therefore not surprising that Jesus warns him to stop sinning (*mēketi hamartane*). That does not imply that sin is the cause of his suffering; rather, it is another invitation to believe in him. In the Fourth Gospel sin is defined as the act of rejecting or refusing to have faith in Jesus. The correlation between sin and belief is underscored in John 16:9. Those who refused to believe him would remain enslaved to sin (8:21, 24, 34).<sup>20</sup> Accepting the healing apart from a personal relationship with Jesus, the healer, would result in a condition far more severe than even a thirty-eight-year ailment as well as the social isolation and exclusion that accompanies it.

Jesus warns him that something worse may happen (*mē cheiron soi ti genētai*) if he refuses to acknowledge Jesus's works. The clause *mē cheiron soi ti genētai* refers to unbelief<sup>21</sup> as well as to the eschatological judgment (vv. 28-30).<sup>22</sup> Jesus speaks of the concepts of resurrection to eternal life and resurrection to judgment (v. 29). Jesus is the giver of life both now and in the future. He will judge at the end of time, as the Father has entrusted the task of judgment to Jesus. Therefore, it implies that sin is fundamentally a rejection of Jesus's works by failing to believe in him (cf. 8:24). In short, sin is unbelief.<sup>23</sup> Rejecting Jesus's works is tantamount to inviting eschatological judgment. Jesus calls him twice to believe in him, but the man does not give an explicit response of faith before Jesus leaves the scene.<sup>24</sup>

It is crucial to note the present tense form of the verb *hamartane*, as it denotes a repeated action. As indicated by the present tense, before and after

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Dark, Reaching for the Light: Reading Character in John 5 and 9," *Semeia* 53 (1991): 59.

20 Keener, *John*, 1: 644.

21 Yong, *Bible, Disability*, 57.

22 Köstenberger, *John*, 182.

23 C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, 2nd ed. (London: SPCK, 1978), 340; Ridderbos, *John*, 299; Brown, *John I-XII*, 350; Carson, *John*, 342.

24 Cf. Jones, *Symbol of Water*, 131-132; contra Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, Sacra Pagina 4 (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998), 172.

being healed, the crippled man commits the sin of not believing in Jesus. Jesus admonishes him to cease sinning. The healed man must cease his unbelief in Jesus. Refusing to believe in Jesus means inviting eschatological judgment. The paralyzed man had experienced the works of Jesus but those works did not lead him to believe in Jesus. The healed crippled man's sin was thus his refusal to believe in Jesus. In the same way that he had not believed in Jesus prior to his healing, the crippled man continued his unbelief after he was restored. Thus, it is possible to assert that the suffering for thirty-eight years was not caused by sin. Regarding this point, scholars seem to have paid little attention. Further explanation is therefore required.

The narrator's use of the literary device of double meaning<sup>25</sup> (v. 6) strengthens the previously stated argument. The word *hygiēs* has a wide range of meaning, including sound, healthy, whole, and physically and spiritually cured (Mt 12:13; 15:31; Mk 5:34; Jn 7:23; Acts 4:10; Tit 2:8).<sup>26</sup> Physical cure and spiritual wholeness are inseparable, as suggested by the double meaning of the term. If one does not perceive Jesus's works as evidence of his being sent by the Father and, consequently, as a call to believe in him, he will endure greater suffering than the paralytic.

It is evident from the preceding that Jesus's works include the healing of the lame man. Consequently, it is essential to analyze Jesus's works as he interacted with him. Jesus says that his works are to accomplish what the Father has given him, and failure to comprehend his works will result in unbelief, as the lame man demonstrates. Therefore, it is important to examine briefly the nature of his works.

Jesus says: *ho patēr mou heōs arti ergazetai kagō ergazomai* (v. 17). This passage reveals three interrelated characteristics of Jesus and the Father: (a) their relationship; (b) their work; and (c) their equality. Jesus explicitly identifies himself as the Son (vv.19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 26), the Son of God (v. 25), and the Son of Man (v. 27), thereby revealing his unique relationship with the Father. In this and other interactions with unbelievers, the protagonist frequently identifies himself as the Son of Man (1:51; 3:13, 14; 6:27, 53, 62; 8:28; 9:35). The emphasis of Jesus's teaching appears to be on his works,

25 On double meaning see E. Richard, "Expression of Double Meaning and Their Function in the Gospel of John," *New Testament Studies* 31 (1985): 96-112; David Wead, *The Literary Devices in John's Gospel* (Basel: Friedrich Reinhardt Kommissionsverlag, 1970), 30-46.

26 See Luck, "ὄγις," 312.

as both relationship and equality are explicated within the context of his works. Jesus affirms that he must work on the Sabbath because the Father's works continue on the Sabbath.<sup>27</sup> In his discourse, Jesus testifies unequivocally that the Father is the source of the works he is performing, thereby exegeting the Father (cf. 1:18). Not only do his works demonstrate his equality with and relationship to the Father, but they also reveal his ontological nature. He is both the Son of Man *and* the Son of God.

The works that Jesus must perform serve as evidence that God has sent him. His works are additional means of exegeting the Father. If one desires evidence that he was indeed sent by God, he or she should examine the works performed in and through his life. This concept is comparable to that of *pisteuōn tō pempanti me* (v. 24), as the object of faith, God, the Father, is described as the God who sent Jesus.

The verbs used in his speech (vv. 19-47) to describe the works of the Father-Son likely provide a clue. The verbs are: *poieō* (nine times), *blepō* (once), *phileō* (once), *deiknymi* (twice), *egeirō* (once), *zōopoieō* (twice), *krinō* (twice), *didōmi* (four times), *pempō* (four times), *akouō* (six times), *zēteō* (twice), *martyreō* (seven times), *oida* (once), *lambanō* (five times), *legō* (five times), *apostellō* (three times), *teleioō* (once), *ginōskō* (once), *erchomai* (six times), *katēgoreō* (twice). Thus, the works, which do not refer to a physical vocation, encompass a variety of activities. However, the list is not exhaustive, so that one could argue, as the majority of scholars did, that they refer to "the whole of Jesus's activity."<sup>28</sup> On closer examination, the works described are more than merely activities. They encompass his entire life. All verbs used are in the active voice, implying that both the Father and the Son are an active and living God. The unity of his work is emphasized, but the distinction between the works of the Father and those of the Son is also emphasized. The word translated as "works" appears in the plural (vv. 20, 36), but, in 4:34 (cf. 6:29; 7:21), the singularity of the work of Jesus and the Father is asserted.

Additionally, the active voice of the verbs reveals the relationship between the Father and Son. It is neither a master-servant nor merely a giver-receiver relationship in which the Son is passively subordinate. It is a dynamic relationship shaped by love (v. 20) and obedience. Due to Jesus's

27 Cf. Köstenberger, *John*, 181.

28 Bultmann, *John*, 265; Dodd, *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, 327; Ridderbos, *John*, 195-197.

unique relationship with the Father, there is thus a Father-Son relationship but not in the sense of genealogical relationship. The relationship between Father and Son is expressed in and through the works of the Son. The breadth of works is so vast that it clarifies both the equality and the relationship between the Father and the Son. The equality in working (vv. 19, 30), receiving honor (v. 23), giving life (v. 21), judgment (vv. 22, 27, 30), having life (v. 26), and as an object of faith (vv. 24, 38, 46) is asserted. The Son's works depict the personal (vv. 23, 24, 30, 36, 38), loving (v. 20), and intimate (vv. 19, 20), relationship between the Father and Son.

In addition, it is significant that the temporal dimension of the works is explicitly mentioned. Jesus asserts that he and his Father are working *heōs arti*, thereby combining eternal and historical time. Jesus asserts that the Father sees (vv. 19, 20), hears (v. 30) and gives (vv. 22, 27, 36) his works, which reveals the eternal and historical dimensions of his works. Their historical dimension is further explained in terms of the present (vv. 24, 25) and "the future" (vv. 28, 30). The temporal framework of Jesus's works alludes to his identity, his preexistence as the Son, and his divine nature.

The preceding discussion leads us to the conclusion that accepting Jesus's works is equivalent to believing in the one whom the Father sent. Nevertheless, one can affirm that to know him through his works leads one to know the Father. Jesus is exegeting the Father and himself (1:18) in and through his works. Consequently, to reject his works means to deny him as the Messiah and the Son of God. However, it should be stressed from the story of the lame man that experiencing the works of Jesus may not necessarily lead one to believe in him. Why? The answer is revealed in the words of Jesus "*ton logon autou ouk echete en hymin menonta*" (v. 38).

In light of previous narrative analysis, the warning given to the lame man to stop sinning is an additional invitation to believe in Jesus. The healed man has experienced Jesus's works, but he appears to reject believing in Jesus. Jesus was visiting the temple in observance of a Jewish festival. When Jesus meets the man at the temple, Jesus invites him to believe in him by issuing a warning. All prior narrative analysis suggests that his disability had no connection to his sin. In short, John 5:14 reveals no correlation between sin and disability. Thus, it is evident that the paralyzed man's suffering has nothing to do with sin.

Recently, Adam Kubiś has reached a somewhat similar conclusion from different approaches and states that "John 5:14 does not focus on the past



sins of the crippled man, but on the past, present and future sin of unbelief in Jesus. As a consequence, the causal relationship between sin and sickness is not implied in 5:14."<sup>29</sup> Kubiś argues that Jesus's words in 5:15 should be interpreted as an invitation to follow him in faith, as he believes that Jesus's words in 5:15 should be elucidated by his words in 5:24.<sup>30</sup> We may assert thus that there is no correlation between sin and human suffering. An examination of John 9 provides additional support for the argument.

### *John 9*

The text of John 9:1-3 will be examined within the narrative of John 9:1–10:21, which is considered "one of the masterpieces of Johannine storytelling."<sup>31</sup> The narrative could be divided into three scenes:

- (a) the words of Jesus and the blind man (9:1-12)
- (b) the impact of the words of Jesus (9:13-34)
- (c) hearing the words of Jesus (9:35-10:21).

The Jews who reject the healing of a man born blind (9:18) are contrasted with the man born blind, who responds in faith (9:36, 38) to Jesus's words (9:35). The narrative is structured around the contrast between those who respond to Jesus's words and believe in Jesus (the disciples, the believing Jews, and the blind man) and those who do not (the cured man's parents, the Jews) who remain unbelievers. The narrative dominant theme, namely, the importance of Jesus's words, is highlighted by contrasting the characters' attitudes toward Jesus's words as well as by the literary design. The blind man dramatizes the impact and the significance of "abiding" in Jesus's words, whereas the crippled man does not have Jesus's words dwelling in him.

The pool of Siloam as the source of water in the water libation ritual of the feast of the Tabernacles continues to play an important role in the narrative. The fact that Siloam means "sent"<sup>32</sup> reflects the notion that the

29 Adam Kubiś, "The Current Debate on the Relationship between Sin and Sickness in John 5:14," *The Biblical Annals* 12, no. 2 (2022): 206.

30 Kubiś, "Current Debate," 203, 222. It is important to mention that Kubiś did not conduct a thorough investigation into the term *hamartanō* in the Gospel of John.

31 Moloney, *John*, 290-291; Brown, *John I-XII*, 376.

32 See Schnackenburg, *John 2*, 243.

healed man is given a mission or is sent—just as Jesus had been sent (9:4).<sup>33</sup> The blind man is sent, so to speak, to demonstrate the impact of abiding in Jesus's words.

Jesus declares the healing of the man born blind to be one of *phanerōthē ta erga tou theou* (v. 3). It is the work performed by God. The genitive in the clause indicates the cause (subjective genitive).<sup>34</sup> The vehement assertion of the cured man in 9:32-33 appears to support this observation. He recognizes that the healing that he has experienced is the manifestation of the work of God, not of a mere human. The crucial inquiry pertains to whether the man who is born blind and subsequently healed is able to perceive Jesus as God. Through engaging in discussions and debates regarding the identity of Jesus, the blind man who was healed comes to the realization that Jesus is indeed God. The recognition of the healed blind man moves from Jesus being regarded as a human (v. 11), a prophet (v. 17), and a man from God (v. 33), to being acknowledged as the Son of Man and Lord (v. 35-38) through the act of worshipping Jesus.

The formula *egō eimi* further attests the divinity of Jesus when the religious leaders seek to stone him (8:59-58). The formula *egō eimi*, which mirrors the OT<sup>35</sup> usage of God's identification, portrays Jesus as equal to God.<sup>36</sup> The repeated use of the formula *egō eimi* in John 10:7, 9, 11, and 14 affirms the act of the cured man in worshipping Jesus as God.

Because the healing occurs on the Sabbath, the man who has been cured is brought to the religious leaders. Even though the healing event is repeated three times (9:11, 15, 25), the fact that he was born blind is still disputed. The debate centers on whether or not Jesus is from God.<sup>37</sup> The only way to refute this is to either deny the healing miracle, which is obviously impossible, or to deny that the cured man had been previously blind (9:18). As well as projecting a hostile attitude toward the

33 Thomas L. Brodie, *The Gospel according to John: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 347; Carson, *John*, 365.

34 Cf. Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 113.

35 David Mark Ball, "I Am" in *John's Gospel: Literary Function, Background and Theological Implications*, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series* 124 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 91-93, 195-198, 258.

36 See John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 141-147.

37 Cf. Bultmann, *John*, 299.

healed man, their statement intimates a rejection of Jesus's words. The unbelieving Jews establish a theological statement that Jesus is not from God because he persistently violates the Sabbath, despite failing to deny the reality of the miracle by not believing the provided information. However, according to Mishnaic law (*Shabbat* 7:2), it is permissible to heal people on the Sabbath.<sup>38</sup> The manner in which the cured man and his parents were interrogated reveals their spiritual blindness. Since it is impossible for them to perceive the divinity of Jesus (9:41), they choose to remain spiritually blind on purpose.<sup>39</sup> Others, however, disagree. They claim that since Jesus is not a sinner, he is from God (cf. 9:16, 24).

In contrast to the healing of the lame man in 5:5-9,<sup>40</sup> the man born blind is not healed instantly by Jesus's words, but rather by his deeds first and then by his words. The blind man dramatizes how to abide in Jesus's words (8:31). Unlike the lame man, people perceive him as a sinner before (9:2) and even after his birth (9:32). The blind man, like the lame man, lives in despair and hopelessness (9:32). Both are adults, indicating that their suffering has been going on for quite a while. Both are marginalized by society. Both do not return to Jesus after being healed, and they remain unnamed, which suggests that the lengthy discourse focuses on the protagonist. The blind man is able to see natural light after he washes the mud from his eyes, but not his eyeballs, in the pool of Siloam, which had been used for the water<sup>41</sup> libation ritual during the feast. Is he so ecstatic that he forgets to thank Jesus, or does this indicate that experiencing a miracle does not necessarily lead one to believe in Jesus? Nevertheless, as with the lame man, Jesus takes the initiative to search for him.

The narrative of the blind man occupies a larger portion of the Gospel because the narrator intends to depict the progress from unbeliever to believer.<sup>42</sup> His immediate return home helps to explain why the healed man only knows the healer's name indirectly. His relationship with Jesus

38 See Severino Pancaro, *The Law in the Fourth Gospel: The Torah and the Gospel, Moses and Jesus, Judaism and Christianity according to John* (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 9-52, 158-168; Keener, *John*, 1: 784.

39 See Judith M. Lieu, "Blindness in the Johannine Tradition," *New Testament Studies* 34, no. 1 (January 1988): 83-84; Barrett, *John*, 365-366.

40 Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design*, 139-140; Staley, "Stumbling in the Dark," 64-65.

41 Cf. Jones, *Symbol of Water*, 175.

42 Cf. Jones, *Symbol of Water*, 161-176.

progresses from knowledge of the man named Jesus (9:11), a prophet (9:17), not a sinner (9:25; cf. 9:31), listened to by God (9:31),<sup>43</sup> a man come from God (9:33), lord (9:37), to the Son of Man, and Lord (9:38). The interrogation by the religious leaders enlightens him spiritually to see the person who restored his sight as progressively evolving from “man called Jesus” to “man come from God,” whereas the religious leaders themselves move in the opposite direction. As a result of his insistence on Jesus’s words and, in effect, his disillusionment with the religious leaders, a new understanding of who Jesus is as both man and God has emerged. Knowing that he has been excommunicated<sup>44</sup> from the local synagogue, Jesus invites him to believe in him. Apparently, the man born blind does not readily recognize Jesus as the Son of Man after he heals him. Jesus’s request brings the healed man, so to speak, to the essence of faith by focusing his growing knowledge on himself (9:35). Puzzled by the request, he *probes kai tis estin, kyrie, hina pisteusō eis auton* and concludes that belief in Jesus implies a relationship with him. This embodies the essence of faith. Jesus’s response of revealing himself to the man who had been cured supports this. However, why then use an indirect and ambiguous request as opposed to a direct one? As so often, the use of the Johannine “Son of Man” is a call to faith in Jesus.<sup>45</sup> By using indirect<sup>46</sup> identification, it indicates the cured man’s progress from unbelief to faith in Jesus.<sup>47</sup> The man born physically and spiritually blind receives new eyes upon encountering Jesus, allowing him to perceive first the natural reality and then the supernatural reality of who Jesus is. Thus, the meaning of the term *κύριε* is expanded when the healed man, who remains nameless, addresses Jesus with it in 9:38. The expansion of meaning parallels the cured man’s transformation from unbelief to belief in Jesus. His public worship<sup>48</sup> of Jesus, which embarrasses the religious leaders, because only God is worthy of worship, gives new meaning to the term *κύριε*. His act of worshipping Jesus, which expresses

43 Cf. Brodie, *John*, 351.

44 Cf. Köstenberger, *John*, 288; Carson, *John*, 375; Ridderbos, *John*, 346-347; Brown, *John I-XII*, 374.

45 Carson, *John*, 376.

46 Cf. M. Müller, "Have You Faith in the Son of Man?," *New Testament Studies* 37 (1991): 191-194.

47 See Schnackenburg, *John* 2, 253; Ridderbos, *John*, 349-350; Bultmann, *John*, 338.

48 Cf. Brown, *John I-XII*, 376.

“the depth and force of the faith,”<sup>49</sup> not only dramatizes his statement in 9:31 and exhausts the authorities’ pressure in 9:24, but also helps in defining Jesus as Lord in the real sense.

It is crucial to note that the encounter with Jesus dramatically altered the blind man’s reputation and image among his neighbors and acquaintances. He was marginalized by his own people. But now he has been dignified from *prosaitēs* to a human being. His affirmative responses appear both to accept his then demeaning predicament and to proclaim his now dignified status. Not only is the man born blind socially dignified, but he is also physically and spiritually healed. This is what is meant by *phanerōthē ta erga tou theou en autō* (cf. 6:29). Moreover, it should be noted that revealing God’s works may not constitute the cause of the man’s blindness.<sup>50</sup> He is now a believer and, as a result, a man of dignity.

The preceding discussion leads us to the centrality of Jesus’s words in expressing the faith of believers. Belief in Jesus inevitably leads to abide in his words. Living out Jesus’s words in a progressive and loving manner is what it means to abide in Jesus’s words. Belief is manifested by steadfastly abiding in and lovingly carrying out Jesus’s words. Faith is the process of transforming his transcendent words into contextual deeds in worship. Belief in Jesus entails being the *tekna theou* (1:12). As a result of being the *tekna theou*, the words of Jesus must be put into practice. Jesus’s words must profoundly affect all human spheres in order for faith to grow. Love is the fruit of abiding in Jesus’s words.

Reading John 9:1-3 within the literary context of John 9:1–10:21 reveals that the clause *phanerōthē ta erga tou theou en autō* points to the blind man’s abiding in Jesus’s words, which led him, as a man of dignity, to worship Jesus as God. Clearly, the clause *phanerōthē ta erga tou theou en autō* has nothing to do with sin.<sup>51</sup> In other words, the man born blind demonstrates through his interactions with characters in the narrative world that there is no correlation between sin and human suffering.<sup>52</sup>

John 5:14 and John 9 demonstrate through contextual criticism that there is no direct causal relationship between sin and human suffering. In

49 Schnackenburg, *John 2*, 254; See Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 34-35.

50 Keener, *John*, 1: 778-779.

51 Also Köstenberger, *John*, 281.

52 Also Keener, *John*, 1: 778; Barrett, *John*, 356.

addition, the results of the exegesis are placed in a constructive dialogue with the Karo people's understanding of the relationship between sin and human suffering, in an effort to read contextually and dialogically. The implementation of this procedure exemplifies the method of contextual criticism, which we proposed as an example of Asian biblical hermeneutics.

### SIN AND HUMAN SUFFERING IN THE KARO PEOPLE

The Karo people are one of the tribes inhabiting the Indonesian province of North Sumatra. In April 1890 the Nederlands Zendelinggenootschap (NZG) mission arrived in the Karo region of North Sumatra in order to preach the gospel to the Karo people. Hendrik C. Kruyt,<sup>53</sup> the first missionary, commenced missionary work in Buluhawar. He returned to the Netherlands after two years, and Jan K. Wijngaarden,<sup>54</sup> who succeeded him, conducted the first baptism on August 20, 1893. The missionaries were faced with two challenges: to communicate the Christian faith to people whose whole life was lived in the context of the Karo primal religion and to convince the Karonese that a Christian was not automatically a "Black Dutchman."<sup>55</sup>

Due to Hindu influence,<sup>56</sup> the Karonese<sup>57</sup> (original belief) believe in a creator god known as "Dibata Kaci-Kaci" (creator god) who rules over three regions (above, middle, below worlds). *Guru Butara* is the name of the god of the world above, the god in the middle world is identified as *Tuhan Padukah ni Aji*, and *Tuhan Banua Koling* is the name of the god of the world below. In traditional Karo belief, the three gods viewed as a unity are known as *Dibata Sitelu* (threefold god). *Dibata Kaci-Kaci* is simultaneously transcendent and immanent.

*Dibata Sitelu's* immanence is reflected in the life structure of the Karo community, which is known as *Sangkep si telu* (threefold relationship),

53 See Rita Smith Kipp, *The Early Years of Dutch Colonial Mission: The Karo Field* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), 49-95.

54 See Kipp, *Early Years*, 97-155.

55 Simon Rae, *Breath Becomes the Wind: Old and New in Karo Religion* (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1994), 80.

56 Rae, *Breath Becomes the Wind*, 8.

57 On Karo belief see E.P. Gintings, *Religi Karo: Membaca Religi Karo dengan Mata yang Baru* (Kabanjahe: Abdi Karya, 1999), 3-18; Rae, *Breath Becomes the Wind*, 18-58.

comprised of *Kalimbubu* (wife-giving families), *Senina* (brother or sister), and *Anak beru* (wife-receiving families). Implementation of *adat* Karo (customary law and traditional beliefs and practices) demonstrates the arrangement of *Sangkep si telu* as a form of *Dibata Sitelu* immanence. Even though the Karo people have a complex concept of God, they pay more attention to *begu* (spirit of a deceased human being) in daily life because these spirits are god's agents in everyday affairs.<sup>58</sup> The *begu* is not generally feared by the Karonese but is respected and held in awe.<sup>59</sup> This indicates that the Karonese strive not to offend *begu*, as doing so leads to disaster. A much more significant *begu* is the spirit of a close relative who died suddenly (*si mate sada wari*) as a result of an accident, act of violence, suicide, or miscarried child.<sup>60</sup> Because of the sudden, traumatic nature of its death the *begu* is a powerful and dangerous spirit and potentially harmful.<sup>61</sup> *Begu* that is a threat to life must be appeased with rituals in order to guarantee the well-being of the community.<sup>62</sup>

Discord in the relationship between the microcosm and the macrocosm can disrupt the well-being of the community.<sup>63</sup> The disintegration of this relationship is disastrous. If there is a disruption in the relationship between the microcosm and macrocosm, the Karo people must perform a number of rituals or ceremonies. If cosmic balance is not restored by suitable ritual intervention and sanctions not taken against the offender, crops may fail, be destroyed by disease, or a serious drought may occur.<sup>64</sup> As a result of *adat* violations (wrongdoing), the equilibrium is disrupted and disasters ensue. Breaking *adat* means inviting disaster in this life, in the form of disasters of one kind or another (sickness, suicide, or untimely death) or judgment (physical deformity, albinism, or leprosy), the punishment often

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58 Rae, *Breath Becomes the Wind*, 25, 27.

59 Rae, *Breath Becomes the Wind*, 22, 23; Frank L. Cooley, *The Growing Seed: The Christian Church in Indonesia* (Jakarta: Christian Publishing House BPK Gunung Mulia, 1981), 174-175; Mary Margaret Steedly, *Hanging without a Rope: Narrative Experience in Colonial and Postcolonial Karoland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 119.

60 Steedly, *Hanging*, 229.

61 Rae, *Breath Becomes the Wind*, 22.

62 Gintings, *Religi Karo*, 21.

63 Gintings, *Religi Karo*, 75.

64 Rae, *Breath Becomes the Wind*, 31-32.

being visited on the children or descendants of the offender.<sup>65</sup> Breaking *adat* is understood by the Karonese as judgment, divine retribution for wrongdoing by the sufferer or by some family member.<sup>66</sup>

The term sin (*dosa*) for the Karo people is understood in *Sanskrit* to mean judgment. From this perspective, it is not wrong to consider breaking *adat* or engaging in wrongdoing as a form of sin. A family member who suffers from an illness due to breaking *adat* is regarded as a sinner or one who is punished. If the wrongdoing threatens the community, then the Karo people will perform rituals according to *adat* and take action against the wrongdoer. Lepers are seen as undergoing divine retribution for wrongdoing, and the sufferer or family member must be banished from the village.

*Adat* violations are not only resolved through rituals, but also through community sanctions. Those who violate *adat* in ways that result in or cause catastrophes are expelled immediately. For example, the blind man who was considered as a condemned person, as reported in a missionary's journal (May 26, 1894), was expelled from his family so "[h]e eats whatever he can get."<sup>67</sup> Those who engaged in incest, which was believed to disturb the entire cosmic equilibrium, were expelled from the village.<sup>68</sup> Thus, the Karo people are well aware of the connection between sin and human suffering.

The Dutch Missionary Society, also known as *Nederlands Zendelinggenootschap* (NZG), was aware of the situation. They intend to teach the Karo people to view disasters from a new perspective. The establishment of the leprosarium was the best illustration of the new understanding of human suffering. Simon Rae writes:

One enterprise of the NZG Mission in Karoland which made an immediate and lasting impression was the Leprosarium at Lausimomo. To the Karonese it embodied a radical new attitude toward an outcast group, shunned and isolated by their society, and to many European observers it was a moving symbol of what, at its best, Christianity stood for.<sup>69</sup>

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65 Rae, *Breath Becomes the Wind*, 12, 31.

66 Rae, *Breath Becomes the Wind*, 32,100; Kipp, *Early Years*, 129.

67 Kipp, *Early Years*, 132.

68 Rae, *Breath Becomes the Wind*, 31, 53.

69 Rae, *Breath Becomes the Wind*, 99-100.



The Karo people view leprosy as a form of punishment, so lepers are shunned and expelled from society. The NZG mission constructed a leprosarium in Lausimomo, Karoland. The presence of a leprosarium and its ministry are well received by the Karo community. When Louis Couperus, a distinguished Dutch writer, visited Lau Simomo in 1921, there were 340 patients. Of the staff Couperus wrote, "I can only compare our missionaries with the greatest of all Christians."<sup>70</sup>

The existence of the leprosy hospital as a demonstration of love is an attempt to teach the Karo people that leprosy is unrelated to sin. This could be seen in two ways: first, the leprosy hospital was transformed into a Karo village, and the village was called *Kuta Keriahen* (cheerful village); second, the patients elected their own village leader, had their own pastures, and settled their quarrels in the traditional village assembly (*runggun adat*).<sup>71</sup> The NZG missionaries' effort in transforming the hospital into a village provided, in my opinion, the best illustration of the doctrine that sin and human suffering are unrelated.<sup>72</sup> It is hoped that the village will allow leprosy patients to live a normal life. But it seemed that the Karo people were unaware of the missionaries' preaching and teaching that sin is unrelated to disaster. In 2010, the eruption of Mount Sinabung revealed that Karo people still keep in their minds the relatedness of sin and human suffering. As a response to the eruption of Mount Sinabung it was believed that sin was to blame. It turns out that human suffering and sin continue to coexist in the lives of the Karo people. The ancient beliefs of the Karo people have returned.<sup>73</sup> A number of previously extinct rituals have reappeared. The Karo people revive ancient rituals in order to appease God's wrath, as expressed by the eruption of Mount Sinabung.

The preceding discussion demonstrates that the link between sin and human suffering is not easily broken. The announcement of missionary L. Bodaan in 1914 that heathenism was dead was somewhat premature.<sup>74</sup>

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70 Rae, *Breath Becomes the Wind*, 101.

71 Rae, *Breath Becomes the Wind*, 100.

72 Cf. Rae, *Breath Becomes the Wind*, 99.

73 Ahmad Arif dan Indira Permanasari S, "Bangkitnya Ritual Orang Gunung," *Kompas.com*, 2011, <https://bola.kompas.com/read/2011/10/14/11113355/index.html?page=all>.

74 Steedly, *Hanging*, 59.

In light of this, the church must continue to emphasize that disconnection between sin and human suffering. The Karo people's understanding of sin as judgment needs to be replaced with teaching and preaching about sin from a Christian perspective so that human suffering is not always related to sin. The church must continue to give careful consideration to the texts of John 5:14 and John 9. Sin and human suffering are not linked, and the church's preaching must continue to emphasize this message. It must remain a cornerstone of church preaching today.

### CONCLUSION

The narrative analysis of John 5:14 and John 9:1-3 reveals that there is no connection between sin and human suffering. In Karo society, the connection between sin and human suffering is not easily broken. In addition to perpetuating marginalization and discrimination against Karonese with disabilities, the sin-suffering conflation poses a serious challenge. In the collective memory of the Karo people, human suffering is still associated with sin. Therefore, the texts of John 5:14 and John 9:1-3 can serve as the primary foundation of church life in the land of Karo in order to constantly remind the Karo people that sin and human suffering are unrelated.

The aforementioned analysis demonstrates the effectiveness of employing contextual criticism not only to reveal the message of the text but also engage it in a constructive and meaningful dialogue with the contemporary context. Giving a new context to an ancient text breathes new life into it.

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